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IN·RVSTIC ENGLAND

WITH·PICTVRES
IN·COLOVR·BY·
BIRKET·FOSTER
THE·CRITICAL·NOTES
BY·A·B·DARYLL·

::·EDITED·BY·::

W·SHAW

::·SPARROW·::

HODDER·AND
STOVGHTON
LONDON·1906





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IN RUSTIC ENGLAND



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IMPRUVISTIC ENGLAND

BORN 1832 DIED 1890

BIRKEL FOSTER, B.W.'S

VALLEY

"MAKING HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES."

FRONTISPIECE

EDITED BY
W. H. H. W.
SPARROW

HODDER AND
STOUGHTON
LONDON 1906

FRONTISPIECE

“MAKING HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

IN · RVSTIC ENGLAND

WITH · PICTVRES
IN · COLOVR · BY.
BIRKET · FOSTER
THE · CRITICAL · NOTES
BY · A · B · DARYLL ·

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W · SHAW
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HODDER · AND
STOVGHTON
LONDON · 1906

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PREFACE

The Anglo-Saxon temperament may be compared to a thing of steel covered with silk. Very often the silk is so thin as to bring out by contrast the varying quality of the steel just partly veiled by it; but sometimes the silk is so glossy and so thick that casual observers are deceived by it and give no thought at all to the well-tempered metal underneath.

A foreign critic, for instance, when he compares the art of England with the nation's achievements in war, in sport, and in colonization, is apt to be staggered

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by the immense contrasts that his study brings to light. It seems to him that a country which has done wondrous deeds should exhibit in all its handiwork the same conquering vitality, the same enriching manliness and heroic enterprise. "Here" the critic says, "there is steel of the best kind, while in the arts of England I am constantly astonished by a silkiness of touch and a sentimental choice of subject which belong, seemingly, to a nation's decline."

All this has been said by many critics both foreign and British, and yet the complaining criticism has no real depth. Not only do

PREFACE

weak nations long for strength and strong nations for delicacy and refinement, but, in addition to that, the complexity of the British temperament explains every one of its manifestations. The Elizabethan crowds on May-day, singing Robin Hood ballads with tipsy gaiety and carrying posies of wild flowers, were not more typical of the race than was the secretly growing Puritanism of the period, which in the hands of Gosson and his followers not only formed its early literature during the progress of the Shakespearian drama, but began actually to submerge that drama before the death

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of Ben Jonson. To decide which was the stronger achievement, the drama or the Puritanism—to estimate which of the two had the more potent historical results—would be difficult; but each was an inevitable product of the British character and genius.

In the same way, too, the idealistic painters of our own time, painters like George Mason and Birket Foster, are every bit as typically British as the unbending qualities of a Lord Kitchener. It is because critics are slow to recognize this fact that they fail to do justice to the simple ballad-pictures painted by Birket Foster,

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painted with a tenderness and skill that endear him to the people and make his work enduringly popular.

Let it not be thought for a moment that Foster's minute intricacy of touch denotes a weakness of hand or heart. In painting, as in music or in surgery, a weak hand is always clumsy and too insistent; lightness of touch is a sure sign of disciplined knowledge and strength. None knew this better than the master landscape-painter of the world, J. M. W. Turner, whose water-colours are miracles of infinite minuteness and delicacy. Birket Foster, during his

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

apprenticeship, came in contact with the engraved work produced under Turner's guidance, and from it he acquired a delight in exquisite detail that remained with him all his life, and to which he gave artistic expression in his own happy, playful way.

Foster painted in water-colour, a medium pre-eminently English, like mezzotint. Another medium in which Englishmen have excelled pre-eminently is the reproductive art of coloured lithography, which was at its best about a generation ago. It was then that Mr. George Rowney and Mr. F. C. McQueen became its chief patrons, and pro-

PREFACE

duced after Birket Foster, as well as after other painters, a series of faithful reproductions in colour that increase year by year in value, now that the international competition for British work grows keener and keener. From among those coloured lithographs the illustrations in this book were chosen and reproduced ; and the subjects represented do justice to Foster at his best, when depicting the cottage children and the rustic life of his own country.

W. SHAW SPARROW

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PLATE 2

“THE PET OF THE COMMON”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

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BORN 1872—DIED 1893

W. S. FOSTER, B. S.

WATER

"THE BEL OF THE COMMON"

WATER



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IN RUSTIC ENGLAND: WITH PICTURES IN COL- OUR BY BIRKET FOSTER

INTRODUCTION CONCERNING RUSTIC ART

In the annals of English art during the period which extends from the time of Gainsborough to the present day are recorded the names of many famous painters of rustic motives. The people of this country are, and always have been, deeply imbued with the love of rural life, and have consistently shown their appreciation of the charms of rusticity. They possess a quiet but very definite sensibility to the beauties of nature, and they relish instinctively the pleasures

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

and occupations of the country. "This western isle hath long been famed for scenes where bliss domestic finds a dwelling place;" and it is not surprising that English artists, who study the better characteristics of "this western isle," should have used largely the resources of their fancy in depicting the picturesqueness of rural poverty, humble but not squalid, and decently maintained. Nor is there any cause to wonder that in the sum total of their achievements in this direction their particular genius has hitherto been manifested more convincingly than in any work of the same

INTRODUCTION

order produced by artists of other nations.

To the foreigner paying a first visit to these shores the antique farmhouses and moss-grown cottages, the winding lanes and green groves, the velvet margins of quiet streams, and the many other details which make up the sweet and restful picture of English rural life, always make a strong appeal by their novel and captivating loveliness ; and, naturally enough, perhaps, we owe to an illustrious foreigner one of the finest and most faithful word-paintings of English landscape that is to be found in our language. "The great

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

charm of English scenery," wrote Washington Irving, "is the moral feeling that seems to pervade it. It is associated in the mind with feelings of order, of quiet, of sober, well-established principles, of hoary usage and revered custom. Everything seems to be the growth of ages of regular and peaceful existence. The old church of remote architecture, with its low massive portal, its Gothic tower, its windows rich with tracery and painted glass, its scrupulous preservation, its stately monuments of warriors and worthies of the olden time, ancestors of the present lords of the soil ; its

PLATE 3

"BRINGING HOME THE CALF"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

BOBBI 1832—DIED 1888

BIRKEL FOSTER, B.W.S.

VIEW

"BRINGING HOME THE CURE."

PLATE 3



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tombstones, recording successive generations of sturdy yeomanry whose progeny still plough the same fields and kneel at the same altar—the parsonage, a quaint irregular pile, partly antiquated, but repaired and altered in the tastes of various ages and occupants—the stile and footpath leading from the churchyard across pleasant fields, and along shady hedge-rows, according to an immemorial right of way—the neighbouring village with its venerable cottages, its public green sheltered by trees under which the forefathers of the present race have sported—the antique family

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

mansion, standing apart in some little rural domain but looking down with a protecting air on the surrounding scene : all these common features of English landscape evince a calm and settled security, and hereditary transmission of home-bred virtues and local attachments, that speak deeply and touchingly for the moral character of the nation."

It is its capacity to inspire sentiments such as those which give to this passage its singular persuasiveness that the scenery of England has gained its power over the artistic mind. Its charm has matured and become perfected

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through the slow lapse of centuries and has, by long association, so affected the modes of thought of our native painters that it has made them a school apart, with aims peculiar to themselves and owing nothing to their foreign predecessors in art. For of early attempts to represent purely rustic subjects pictorially there are comparatively few which can be instanced. The ancient Greeks, for instance, concerned themselves with glorifications of nature, with idealisations of humanity and with the presentation of human beauty at its highest. They chose their subjects from religious myths for

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the most part, and when they treated the life of their own times they preferred to represent their statesmen, their warriors, or their athletes, not their peasantry ; though in the decoration of their vases they often depicted subjects from daily life, such as young men and women exchanging gifts of fruit, toilet boxes, and other objects. Towards the middle of the fifth century the growing importance attached to local legends, especially to those which gathered round the hero, Theseus, is particularly noticeable — probably Theseus was regarded as the typical athlete and his contests as

PLATE 4

“ WITHIN THE WOOD ”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

"WITHIN THE WOOD"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1822—DIED 1891



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INTRODUCTION

having some analogy with scenes in the gymnasium. This would to some extent account for the tendency of the decorations of the red-figured vases and cups to become in some sort glorifications of the Attic athlete, the representations of whom, running and leaping or occupied in various forms of revelry, are out of all proportion to other subjects.

The Assyrians, at an earlier period, chiefly illustrated sporting and hunting incidents in their mural reliefs, or battle scenes in which their kings and great chiefs took part. The walls which the artists were called to decorate

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

were sometimes those of temples, but more often of the royal palaces ; and, if we may judge from what the exploration of the Assyrian ruins has revealed, it would seem that the ancient art patrons were human enough to desire that their heroic deeds, real or alleged, should be heralded to the world and recalled incessantly to their own recollection. Battle pieces and hunting scenes were also much favoured by the Egyptians ; but in their wall paintings the life of the people—of the peasantry of the period—was not entirely disregarded, for there are in existence fairly

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numerous representations of bird catching, fishing, agricultural work, and of such like occupations of the workers in the fields.

The Early Italians touched little on what we should now call rusticity ; they mostly painted the symbolical, religious, and historical subjects which were demanded by the nobles and church dignitaries who were then the chief patrons of the artist. Italian art is, indeed, with all its richness of output, curiously lacking in observation of the simple charm of rustic life. We have, in fact, to come down to the nineteenth century to find an Italian painter

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

who was willing to study sympathetically the poor and humble country folk and to set them pictorially in right relation to the rugged grandeur of nature. The peasantry in the pictures of Segantini toil with the unconscious grace that comes from uncomplaining acceptance of their lot ; the dignity of labour ennobles them and gives them their proper place in the world which he sought to depict. They have acquired from their mountain surrounding something of its impressiveness and its large simplicity, and they are fully in keeping with the scenes with

INTRODUCTION

which they are associated. His paintings have really much of the solemnity and noble simplicity by which the religious compositions of his artistic ancestors were distinguished, and yet they bear throughout the stamp of rustic beauty.

Spain, also, has produced few painters of real country life. Like the Italians, the Spaniards preferred to represent religious subjects and incidents from the lives of their contemporaries who played parts of importance in the social world. The early painters were, for the most part, indifferent to the pictorial opportunities open

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

to them in the villages and pastoral districts ; but some artists, like Velazquez and Murillo, treated low-life motives in various pictures of beggars and street urchins, and in the " kitchen pieces " which were in feeling not unlike the works of so many of the Dutch painters — scenes in drinking-booths, inn kitchens, and other similar places affected by the lower orders.

A kind of fanciful and decorative rusticity, without any serious regard for actuality or truth to nature, is the keynote of the attempts made by the earlier French painters to represent rural

INTRODUCTION

life. During the seventeenth century France scarcely had an art of her own. Under the yoke of the Italian tradition her painters wasted their energies in tediously repeating the ideas of other people, and remained wilfully blind to the beauties of nature. To this period of dullness and pomposity succeeded one of light and gaiety when the joy of life was expressed by a very charming convention. The so-called "pastoral" artists of the eighteenth century entered upon an orgie of masquerade illustrating an unreal and theatrical sort of rural existence,

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

idealised out of all likeness to the real thing, but not unpleasing in its prettiness and delicate charm. But since the conception of the characters portrayed in the paintings of these men is essentially artificial, the attractiveness of their work lies not so much in the interest of its action as in the passion and sweetness of its decorative sentiment, though technical merits of the highest order can by no means be denied to it. Watteau, Boucher and Fragonard were the chief exponents of the artificial atmosphere of the mock pastoral style of the day. Watteau's shepherds

PLATE 5

“ BIRDS'-NESTING ”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

THE BIRKET FOSTER

and it is the only one of its kind in the world. It is a very rare bird, and is found only in the mountains of the Himalayas. It is a very beautiful bird, and is very much prized by the people of the Himalayas. It is a very rare bird, and is found only in the mountains of the Himalayas. It is a very beautiful bird, and is very much prized by the people of the Himalayas.

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

It is a very rare bird, and is found only in the mountains of the Himalayas. It is a very beautiful bird, and is very much prized by the people of the Himalayas. It is a very rare bird, and is found only in the mountains of the Himalayas. It is a very beautiful bird, and is very much prized by the people of the Himalayas. It is a very rare bird, and is found only in the mountains of the Himalayas. It is a very beautiful bird, and is very much prized by the people of the Himalayas. It is a very rare bird, and is found only in the mountains of the Himalayas. It is a very beautiful bird, and is very much prized by the people of the Himalayas.



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INTRODUCTION

and shepherdesses, whom he idealised till they resembled Court ladies in fanciful disguise rather than the peasants they were supposed to represent, have lived by virtue of the exquisite precision of the painter's methods and the extraordinary brilliance and daintiness of his art, and certainly not because they can be taken as typical of the country people of the time.

The writings of Diderot reveal the fact that towards the end of the eighteenth century the people of France were beginning to rebel against the prevailing want of artistic sincerity. The nation

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was becoming more and more studious and serious, and the philosophy of Rousseau was steadily taking possession of the popular mind. The intelligent men were satiated with the painted coquetries of that voluptuous era, and many of them were prepared to reject definitely enough the artificiality, insincerity and exaggerated refinement which had too long been forced upon them by the workers in art. A "simpler life" movement began, in fact, and of this movement there is a plain reflection in the earlier genre pictures of such an artist as Greuze,—though, it

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must be admitted, that, after having in these earlier pictures preached with some eloquence against the prevalent sensuality of the age, in his later productions he showed that he could not altogether free himself from the influence of his surroundings.

However, at a time when freedom had degenerated into license, and even into actual obscenity, it must be counted to Greuze's credit that he exhibited "A Father Reading the Bible to His Children," a pious presentment of humble life which seemed somehow to have strayed

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

by accident among the pictures of the Court painters—pictures which for many years past had been quite free from the suspicion of any odour of sanctity. Yet the canvases of Greuze are not marked by very discriminating observation of real life; they scarcely give us what Zola called “Nature seen through a temperament.” The conventions upon which they were based are too apparent, and reveal too definitely an artificial and merely sentimental view of existence. His figures are always posing, always over-acting parts that have been too carefully studied.

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For this reason a higher artistic mission may be said to have been fulfilled by Chardin. Unlike Greuze, he did not attempt to moralise on canvas or to make his characters seductive by affected graces ; in his pictures we can perceive far more truly the atmosphere that comes from sympathy with the sweetness and unconscious simplicity of well-ordered home life.

In the early Dutch and Flemish art the models for many pictures were chosen from the peasant class, but it would be futile to seek in the works of men like the Van Ostades, Jan Steen, or

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

Brouwer, for the true feeling of open air rusticity, though undoubtedly Teniers caught sometimes the inspiration of the Low Countries with their flower spangled meadows, fields of grain, and groves of trees. To a great extent Rembrandt's uncouth, heavy-set peasant, made rugged by hardships and strengthened by a life-long struggle with adversity, became the type which was accepted by his successors. The Dutch peasant of those days lived hard, toiled incessantly, and fed sparingly, but, nevertheless, he maintained strenuously a very practical idea of personal enjoy-

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ment. The work of the Dutch painters presented essentially a portrait of contemporary Holland and its people, and by its faithfulness to the subject matter available resulted in a series of often humorous but usually brutally realistic paintings of rollicking debauchery. The canvases of Jan Steen, who dealt mostly with the coarser side of things, are full of boisterous vivacity ; he depicted the low comedy of human life in a spirit of genial toleration, and even approbation, though now and again he introduced telling touches of satire which recall the pictorial morality of Hogarth.

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Van Ostade shows us the peasant's cottage within and without, the outside with its overgrowth of vine leaves, the inside a mere patchwork of rafters and thatch, squalid and untidy. The people living in these hovels bear in face and figure the impress of their existence, with its constant privations and never-ending struggle. Even their clothes, worn and battered into shapelessness, seem to be the cast-offs of previous generations—the boy wears the tattered garments of his father and grandfather. From such materials as these it was not easy to extract poetry, but yet,

PLATE 6

“THE RUSTIC STILE”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

IN THE FUTURE

Very little change in the
present's course, which and
without, the inside work in over-
growth of the leaves, the wide
a more perfect work of nature and
thick, equal and simple. The
people have their hands but
in fact and again the nature
of their work, with a com-
mon power and great energy
which is the cause of their
work and the cause of their
power, and in the end of all
power and power—this is
what the world knows of
his father and grandfather. From
this it is clear that it was not
any to cause poetry, but yet

BORN 1852 DIED 1880

BIRKEL FOSTER, B.M.S.

WIFE

THE BIRKEL STONE

BY THE



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INTRODUCTION

despite the ugliness of the peasant life, the greater Dutch painters made it interesting to a certain extent ; and Teniers, at least, produced pictures which had something of the sprightliness and sparkle of Watteau's compositions. But he was in his way an idealist ; he did not represent literally the coarse amusements of the boors and he glossed over their poverty as far as he could. His villagers drink, play games, dance, and sing, but they seldom brawl or indulge in the gross forms of jollity which the other artists of that period were so ready to dwell upon.

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

It was left to English painters to raise rustic art to its right place and to invest it with a significance that it had scarcely possessed before. In a sense the English rustic school may be said to have adopted the Dutch tradition but without servility and without any excessive acceptance of the ideas and preferences of the artists of the Low Countries. At first, it is true, the imitation of the Dutch school was too close and unintelligent, and in the eighteenth century it caused a deterioration of a very definite kind in the treatment of open air motives by English painters.

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They were so anxious to observe certain rules of style that they forgot nature in evolving the expression of what they thought nature ought to be. They manufactured pictures in the studio, and brought together the details of their landscapes, mountains, trees, rivers, clouds, and accessory figures, in accordance with an accepted recipe. Colour was entirely conventional : greys and browns predominated, and other colours were introduced strictly by rule and with little reference to the actual hue of the particular object represented. Geological formation was wholly ignored,

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

and the foliage of trees was treated in a mechanical fashion, which was the outcome of a strict and rigid system.

The beginning of the revival of landscape in England was due to the efforts of Wilson and Gainsborough. Steeped as he was in classical tradition Wilson must be assigned a prominent place among the earlier of our artistic reformers, though the scope of his art was limited by his concession to the prevalent opinion of his contemporaries concerning nature. They made nature a peg upon which to hang a mythological subject set in a correct

INTRODUCTION

composition of trees, lakes and classical buildings. He introduced mythological personages into his pictures, but, with some inconsistency, gave them surroundings which were in a measure realistic. In his management of these surroundings can be seen a real effort to arrive at something like truth of atmosphere and colour, and at a naturalistic expression of subtleties of illumination and tone relation. He was, indeed, the link between the older formal school and the later men who devoted themselves seriously to sincere nature study ; and his works, with all their departures from

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

strict veracity, compare more than favourably with the elegant feebleness of Zuccarelli and the other complacent mediocrities of that date who prospered while Wilson was allowed to remain in abject poverty.

But by the truly artistic versatility of Gainsborough the movement towards better and saner understanding of the relation between art and nature was made certain and decisive. Gainsborough was not merely a good landscape painter ; he was one of the most original artists of any time or country. His earlier landscapes are rather hard and formal

INTRODUCTION

and show how much he was influenced by his knowledge of the Dutch masters ; but this influence, if strong at first, yielded more and more, as time went on, to the healthier prompting of his own individuality. He soon came to disregard the traditional formalities, and, in painting the country he knew, to seek for the legitimate pictorial arrangement of the subject he chose for representation rather than for a purely idealised composition of stock properties. It was his protest against the old idea that all natural and ordinary scenes—

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

in England at any rate—were commonplace and unworthy of the artist's attention, which was ultimately to bear fruit in the creation of the true and healthy spirit of modern art. His canvases show no straining after the impossibly grand and sublime but rather a love of home scenes of rural repose and sheltered quiet. His sympathies were aroused by a comparatively limited range of subjects, and he usually presented his pastorals under one of two aspects—either the sky is full of clouds and the wind is blowing briskly, or the air is peaceful and the

PLATE 7

“THE BOAT RACE”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



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INTRODUCTION

setting sun casts its slanting rays across meadow and woodland. But for the most part his landscapes are all brightness and sunshine, and reflect the temperament of this "good, kindly, happy man," as Constable called him.

Gainsborough was fond of introducing cottage children and peasant figures to give life and animation to his pictures, and his records of quiet country with its human accessories are the first signs of the development of a new purpose in English art—the association of man with nature and the setting of simple folk in

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

the surroundings natural to them. Another powerful factor in this development was the genius of Morland, who also owed something indirectly to his Dutch predecessors. The art of George Morland is somewhat akin to that of Robert Burns ; both presented nature in her homeliest garb, and both delighted the world with the power and beauty of their manner of expression. A cheerful, healthy mode of looking at things is, according to that able critic, M. Robert de la Sizeranne, peculiar to British artists ; and though Morland painted the poor and

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humble, and even the vagabond and the beggar, the charm of his pictures consists in the air of rural beauty, health and happiness with which they are pervaded. His records of the country life of his period are unsurpassable in their truth ; and he had the advantage of living at a time when England was more attractive from the painter's point of view than she can claim to be to-day, despite the still beautiful character of her rural districts. No District Councils existed then to abolish the thatched roofs of cottages and barns ; quaint signs hung

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

from the bay-windowed wayside taverns ; the women and children with their scarlet and blue cloaks, and the men and boys with their smock frocks and broad-brimmed hats, were a delight to the artist. Those were the days, too, of bustling stage-coaches, of country ale-houses with their revelries and jollifications, of turn-pike roads along which passed streams of wayfarers on horse or foot. The navy was then largely manned by the exertions of the ubiquitous press-gang, incidents in whose operations Morland loved to paint ; and smuggling was a recognised and picturesque

INTRODUCTION

if somewhat hazardous calling ; while the churchwarden pipe and the punch-bowl were much in evidence, and everyone, high and low, yielded freely to the convivial customs of the time.

In drawing upon the material provided by an age so robust and unaffected Gainsborough displayed always the greatest refinement of feeling and elegance of taste, while Morland showed a preference for a lower type of study, though he drew with equal success the characters he selected. "Those who have visited the cottage of the peasant, who have enjoyed rural sports, or engaged

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

in rustic occupations," wrote George Dawe, R.A., "will feel a peculiar charm in the works of Morland, arising from associations which the truth of his pencil never fails to excite ; but Gainsborough seems most calculated to delight those whose ideas of such employments have been refined by the descriptions of pastoral poetry." Both men, in fact, were essential for the proper building up of that great school of open air painting which is one of the glories of English art ; and both played their parts with rare distinction.

Thenceforward the prominence

INTRODUCTION

assumed by rustic genre and pure landscape led to a deeper and more direct study of nature and to a more earnest effort to express the domestic and popular sentiment. The English rustic painters, including such men as Mulready, De Wint, Constable, William Collins, James Ward, Creswick, and a very large proportion of our water colourists, followed the lead of Gainsborough and Morland, and discovered the possibility of giving new vitality to the interpretation of rural motives by simplicity and sincerity of expression. The tendency of rustic art became

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

markedly towards emancipation, by the efforts of independent workers, from the slavery of tradition, and towards a more personal contemplation and knowledge of contemporary life under every aspect. It grew more and more to be the art of the people, a mixture of naturalism and poetry, no longer appealing only to a restricted and more or less fastidious public, but, on the contrary, adapting its æsthetic appeal and its moral teaching to the popular apprehension of the Anglo-Celtic race.

PLATE 8

“SUMMER TIME”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

IN ARTISTIC ENGLAND

markedly towards emancipation
by the action of independent
writers, from the slavery of
tradition, and towards a more
personal and individual
mode of expression, and under
every aspect of the art of the
people, a marked and
poetry, and in the
country, and in the
equal and just and common to
the popular and common of the
Anglo-Saxon.

BORN 1857 DIED 1903

BIRKEL FOSTER, B.W.S.

WELLES

"SUNSHINE LINES"

LEAF 8



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BIRKET FOSTER

I BIOGRAPHICAL

Between the earlier painters and those of the present generation, though somewhat apart from both, stands a man who has had a considerable share in keeping up the continuity of the line of artists by whom the incidents of English rustic life have been regarded as fit subjects for treatment. This is Birket Foster who, in a manner quite his own, developed and carried on the Gainsborough tradition. He took rural life, the life of the cottager—and particularly of the cottage children—and gathered from it a vast amount of valuable material. In the daily events of

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

country existence—its common-places rather than its occasional tragedies and dramatic episodes—he found a host of pictorial opportunities, which he used agreeably and with a proper sense of the rural atmosphere. He became in art what Wordsworth, Thomson, Cowper, and Gray—and in some measure Herrick too—were in poetry, an exponent of Nature touched but not spoiled by civilisation, and of humanity which retained some of Nature's grace and unaffectedness. It is the dainty naturalism of his art that makes it attractive and gives it a place among the classics. He felt

BIRKET FOSTER

quite rightly one side of Nature—her delicate prettiness—and he represented it with a correctness of sentiment that cannot be denied; and it is this truth of sentiment that gives to his work a right to attention which cannot be so justly claimed by artists of more technical strength, and of more commanding powers of expression.

Birket Foster owned descent from an old Quaker family, which for many generations had occupied a prominent and honourable position in the county of Durham. The artist's grandfather violated the articles of faith to which the Society of Friends adheres, by

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

engaging in the unhallowed pursuit of war. During the eighteenth century he appears to have been a naval officer of high repute for courage and energy, and to have taken part in several encounters with privateers—for which backsliding he doubtless won the reprobation of his sect. Be that as it may, the “Pedigree of the Fosters of Cold Hasledon, in the County Palatine of Durham” records the fact that, while occupying the position of store-keeper at Bermuda, where he carried on a branch of his father’s business, “he was moved by the spirit (not the peaceable one of the Quaker,

PLATE 9

“ THE SUNFLOWER ”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1852—DIED 1899.



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BIRKET FOSTER

but the true spirit of an Englishman) to make up his accounts, quit his store, collect together a few sailors, lay aside the Quaker, mount a cockade, and join a Lieutenant Tinsley, then fitting out a small armed vessel against the Americans. Coming in her to Portsmouth, after several severe actions, he got himself recommended to Captain Reynolds as an officer likely to show him some business ; was with him in the *Jupiter* of fifty guns, when they went alongside a French frigate of sixty-four guns, was, in a desperate action which ensued, sent for by the captain, the master

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

being killed, and appointed master in his place ; and managing the ship for the remainder of the action, was appointed lieutenant of the *Pelican*.

This same Robert Foster was also a friend of poets, for in 1806 Southey wrote of him " Wordsworth sent me a man the other day who was worth seeing ; he looked like a first assassin in *Macbeth* as to his costume, but he was a rare man. He had been a lieutenant in the Navy, and was scholar enough to quote Virgil aptly. He had seen much and thought much, his head was well stored, and his heart was in the

BIRKET FOSTER

right place." The last sentence suggests that perhaps the ex-naval officer sympathised with the spirit of the Lake School of Poetry, and believers in the theory of heredity will point to this in order to explain the fact that Birket Foster's long series of dainty paintings, which depict so happily the charms of rural England and the ways of the poorer country folk, were the outcome of an inherited attachment to the convictions of the Lake Poets, as exemplified by Wordsworth in his famous preface to the "Lyrical Ballads."

This passage runs as follows :—
"Humble and rustic life was

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language ; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated ; because the manners of rural life germinate from three elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more

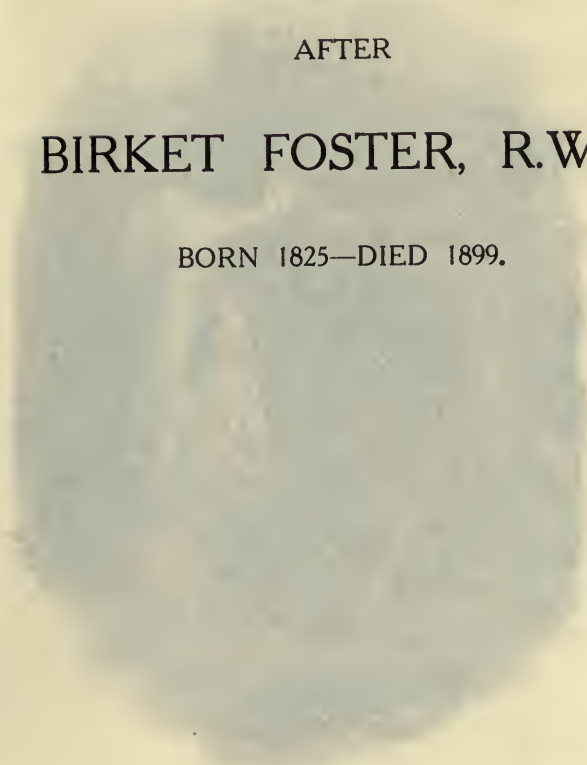
PLATE 10

"FILLING THE PITCHER"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



REPRODUCED BY THE BRITISH MUSEUM FROM THE ORIGINAL IN THE POSSESSION OF THE ARTIST

THE PITCHER

and in 1855, when the pitcher

was "FILLING THE PITCHER."

It was copied from a painting by

the artist, and after

some time it was

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

of the artist, and after

some time it was

born 1825 - died 1899.

He was a member of the

association, and after

some time it was

born 1825 - died 1899.

He was a member of the

association, and after

some time it was

born 1825 - died 1899.

He was a member of the

association, and after

some time it was



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BIRKET FOSTER

durable ; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.”

Myles Birket Foster, better known as Birket Foster, was born at North Shields on the 4th of February, 1825, his mother being a daughter of Mr. Joseph King, of Newcastle-on-Tyne. He was the youngest but one of a family of seven children of whom six were boys. He received the greater part of his education in or near London where his father came to live when the boy was about five years old, and he seems

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

in early childhood to have fallen under influences well calculated to develop the artistic inclinations which, according to a family tradition, he manifested even before he could speak. His first school, at Tottenham, was directed by two ladies who seem to have possessed a great deal more sympathy for art than is usually to be found in the presiding geniuses of establishments of this character, and who, moreover, were not unskilful in teaching the rudiments of drawing. Their efforts no doubt did much to encourage the æsthetic instincts of a boy whose earliest memories

BIRKET FOSTER

were associated with the picture books of Thomas Bewick, the celebrated draughtsman and wood-engraver, and one of the most thoroughly original and English of British artists. Bewick was, indeed, alive at Newcastle when Birket Foster was born at North Shields ; and it is worthy to mention that the boy's grandfather, Robert Foster, the friend of Wordsworth and Southey, was also on terms of intimacy with Bewick.

On leaving Tottenham, Birket Foster was sent to the School for the Children of the Society of Friends at Hitchen, in Hertford-

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

shire, where again he had the advantage of sound and intelligent instruction in drawing from Charles Parry, one of the masters in the school. When, at the age of sixteen, he came to the end of his school-life, and the question arose as to what should be his choice of a profession, his inclinations towards an artistic career had fully ripened. But the pursuit of art was not in those days so lucrative as it became a few years later, and several painters of note, who were intimate friends of the Foster family, bore witness to the precariousness of their calling. Mr. Foster would have preferred

PLATE 11

"THE COTTAGE NURSE"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER. R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

BORN 1852 - DIED 1899.

BIKKET FOSTER. R.W.S.

КЕТТА

THE COLLAGE INKSE,"

III ETAL



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BIRKET FOSTER

for his son an occupation in which there were more definite probabilities of a comfortable livelihood, but he found the boy's aspirations to be so keen that he wisely refrained from thwarting them. A kind of compromise was effected, and though young Birket's desire was to become a landscape painter it was arranged that he should enter the establishment of a Mr. Stone, a die-engraver, whose place of business was in Margaret Street. On the day on which the articles of apprenticeship were to have been signed, however, Mr. Stone committed suicide and consequently

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

a fresh scheme had to be devised.

Among the artistic friends of the Foster family was the well known wood-engraver, Ebenezer Landells, who had been a pupil of Bewick. The advice of Landells was sought about the boy's future, and ultimately he offered to give young Foster the opportunity of acquiring a knowledge of wood engraving without requiring him to be bound by a formal apprenticeship. Naturally, this offer was gladly welcomed because it provided a very promising way out of a difficulty : and by its acceptance was commenced that connection of Birket Foster with

BIRKET FOSTER

Landells which may fairly be said to have started the young artist on his long and successful career—a career, however, of which the full fruits were earned by Foster's consistent efforts to interpret nature's suggestions with intelligence and grace.

In those days the practice of wood-engraving necessitated a good deal of artistic study, and demanded something more than mechanical skill. The engraver had to be as much an artist as the draughtsman whose works he had to translate, for the draughtsman was often content to make the merest suggestion on the

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

block, and to the engraver was left the task of amending the outline here and of adding necessary details there. His was a second art growing out of the first, and it had no little importance because there was then no known method of presenting the draughtsman at first hand. In the sixties was introduced the practice of photographing the original drawing upon the wood block—an improvement on the earlier process—but even then much was left to the engraver. In fact, the real artist whose work appeared in the final print was rather the engraver than the draughtsman ;

PLATE 12

"CATCHING BUTTERFLIES"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



THE BUTTERFLY

"CATCHING BUTTERFLIES"

THE BUTTERFLY

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1835 DIED 1892

THE BUTTERFLY



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BIRKET FOSTER

sometimes he improved upon the original by his manner of transcription, sometimes he ruined it; but if he had proper qualifications for his profession he certainly shared equally with the draughtsman the credit of giving to the illustration its full measure of charm.

To the fact that there was laid upon the engraver so great a degree of responsibility the next important step in Birket Foster's progress towards success as an artist was definitely due. When he first went to Landells he was naturally unable, through his ignorance of the technicalities of

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

wood engraving, to undertake any work upon the drawings which had been sent to the workshop for reproduction. So he was told to experiment upon drawings of his own ; and accordingly he made some designs upon the blocks given to him for his first essays in engraving. But when Landells saw these designs he declared that they were "too good to spoil," advised the boy to become a draughtsman rather than an engraver, and proceeded at once to put in his way the most useful opportunities of acquiring a thorough knowledge of illustrative work.

BIRKET FOSTER

The first thing given him to do in his new capacity as an illustrator was the redrawing and improvement of certain sketches intended for the illustration of a book by S. C. Hall and his wife on "Ireland, its Scenery and Character," and he was next entrusted with the copying of Stanfield's drawings for Captain Marryat's "Poor Jack." But, once started, he did not lack occupation; the number of illustrated books and periodicals with which his master was concerned was steadily increasing, and he had sufficiently proved his capacities, by what he had already done, to

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

take a full share in the work on hand.

At the moment of his entry into the workshop the chief publications upon which Landells was engaged were the *Penny Magazine* and the books published by Charles Knight; but to these were almost immediately added *Punch* and *The Illustrated London News*, with both of which journals Birket Foster was long connected. His first contribution to *Punch* appeared on September 5th, 1841, and, though for a while he drew for it only a number of grotesque initial letters, in December of that year he did a

PLATE 13

“THE MARKET CART”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

2.W

1881

DIED

1 1832-
207
KRAM

THE

...for a while he ... for a while a ...

1981 DIED 1882

BRYCE FOSTER, B.W.S.

91313A

THE MARKET TRADING

ITALY



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BIRKET FOSTER

much more important piece of work, the principal cartoon, "Jack (Lord John Russell) cutting his name on the beam," a caricature of a drawing by Cruikshank for Harrison Ainsworth's "Jack Sheppard." *The Illustrated London News* was started in May, 1842, and though at the outset it had few claims to attention as an artistic publication, it soon began to improve. As it gained in popularity more consideration was given to the quality of the illustrations and more care was taken to secure the right kind of material for them. Consequently Birket Foster, on the strength

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

of his growing reputation as a draughtsman, was often deputed, as a special artist, to go about to various places to make sketches of subjects and incidents worthy of pictorial representation. For instance, he was responsible for a series of illustrations of Queen Victoria's visit to Germany in 1845, which were drawn by him on the block from sketches supplied by Landells.

But while he was busy in this way with the journeyman work of illustration, he had not forgotten his desire to gain a place among the artists of his time, and in his attempts to gratify this de-

BIRKET FOSTER

sire he was fully encouraged by his genial and considerate master. He used to tell how Landells would say to him, "Now that work is slack in these summer months, spend them in the fields; take your colours and copy every detail of the scene as carefully as possible, especially trees and foreground plants, and come up to me once a month and show me what you have done;" and he was always the first to admit what a debt of gratitude he owed to the man who took such a kindly and rational interest in his welfare. For this going out to nature was just what he needed

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

to keep him from becoming stereotyped, and from falling too much under the influence of the conventions which are apt to affect the worker in black and white.

Moreover, if he had not been given this desultory but eminently helpful art training, it would have been very difficult for him, placed as he was, to obtain any insight at all into the technicalities of the painter's craft. To enter the Royal Academy schools would have been scarcely possible for him, and he was forced to depend upon what assistance he could get from people who sympa-

PLATE 14

“COAST SCENE, CULLERCOATS”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

IN NORTH ENGLAND

in 1851 from the
university, and from being re-
minded of the influence of the
conventions which are apt to
affect the mind in black and
white.

Moreover, he had been
given the liberty but not the
help of the university, it would have
been very difficult to have
as he was, and he was brought
in all his own way, and he was
the power of the law. To put the
Royal Academy of Arts would
have been a great help to
him, and he was forced to depend
upon what he could
get from people who sym-

BORN 1831--DIED 1891

WILLIAM ROSS, R.A.

WILLIAM

"SCOTT SCENE" SCOTTSCOTT

PLATE 14



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BIRKET FOSTER

thised with his aspirations for his chances of increasing his store of knowledge. That other lovers of art besides Landells were ready to give him this assistance cannot be disputed, and in proof of this a story may be quoted from the excellent biography of the artist written some sixteen years ago by Mr. Marcus B. Huish as a Christmas number of the "Art Journal": "To obtain the friendship of a collector of pictures was a great boon to a young artist, and Birket Foster was exceptionally fortunate in this respect. For he had not been long at Landells' before he was taken

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

notice of by Jacob Bell, the chemist, the friend of Landseer, and the donor of the fine collection by that artist to the National Gallery. Landells had recommended the boy to copy engravings, as they would teach him how to represent colour by line and tint, and Mr. Bell, who was a friend of his father, was only too ready to lend him for this purpose the Landseer proofs which were then being engraved after that artist's works. These, by rising at an early hour, he found time to copy. One day, presenting a pen and ink drawing after one of these engravings to

BIRKET FOSTER

Mr. Bell, he was so pleased with it that he would have it taken off at once for Landseer to see, who, he said, was at that moment dining with Callcott at Fladong's Hotel in Oxford Street. But the boy was shy and would not go, and he missed an interview which might have been of much assistance to him ; however the excellence of the copy was attested by his selling it elsewhere for the considerable sum of twenty guineas."

The acquisition of this sum of money was to Birket Foster particularly opportune, because by its aid he was able to pay

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

a long wished for visit to the Highlands, which he was specially desirous to see for the sake of enlarging his outlook on nature. His visit to Scotland ended, however, in disaster; an accident befel him whereby he broke his right arm, and an illness followed which at one time was so serious that for some days his life was despaired of. It is characteristic of him, and a proof of his love of his profession, that during this period of enforced idleness when he could not use his right arm, he taught himself to draw with his left hand.

In 1846 his term of service in

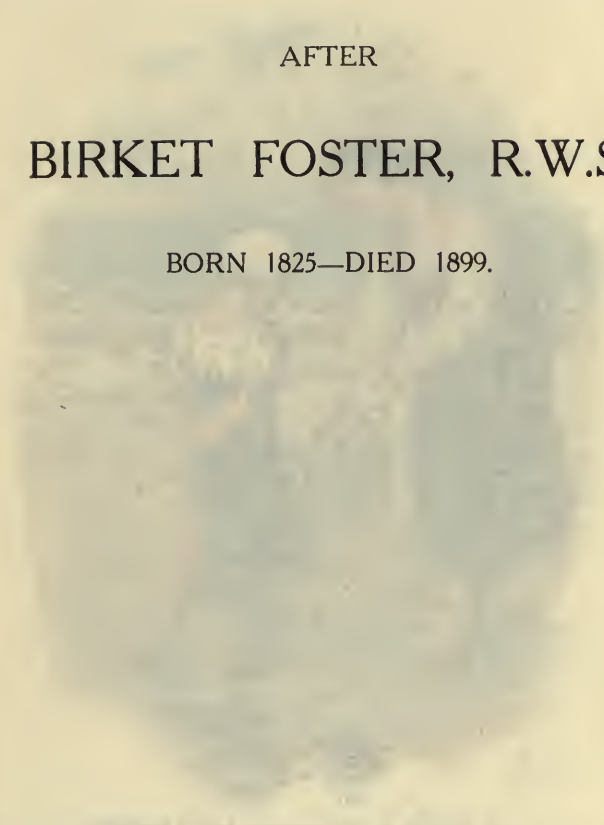
PLATE 15

“ SHRIMPING ”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



DECEMBER 1891

"SHRIMPING"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1877—DIED 1933

1891



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BIRKET FOSTER

the workshop of Landells came to an end, and he launched himself on the world as a fully-qualified illustrator, ready to execute any work that might come in his way. He obtained his first employment from Henry Vizetelly, who commissioned him to draw the illustrations for a book by Thomas Miller, called "The Boy's Country Book"; and these drawings were so much appreciated that Vizetelly, who was not only a publisher, but undertook printing and engraving for other firms, gave the young artist introductions to many of his clients. Among these

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

was David Bogue, who was preparing an edition of Longfellow's "Evangeline," and was in search of a quite suitable illustrator for it. He entrusted the work to Birket Foster, whose success in carrying out this eminently congenial commission can be judged from the remarks of a critic in the *Athenæum*, a journal little addicted to superfluity of praise. "A more lovely book than this," he wrote, "has rarely been given to the public ; Mr. Foster's designs, in particular, have a picturesque grace and elegance which recall the pleasure we experienced on our first exam-

BIRKET FOSTER

ination of Mr. Rogers's "Italy" when it came before us illustrated by persons of no less refinement and invention than Stothard and Turner."

These illustrations of "Evangeline" undoubtedly laid the foundation of his fortunes as a worker in this branch of art. Bogue gave him immediately other poems of Longfellow to illustrate, and a little later sent him on a tour up the Rhine and to the Austrian Tyrol to collect material for some further books. More work followed quickly from other publishers, and for nearly twenty years he was kept

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

actively and continuously employed. During this period he executed an enormous amount of illustrative work, marked always both by careful actuality and by a quite exceptional minuteness and delicacy of treatment.

But amid this multiplicity of engagements he never allowed himself to lose sight of his original purpose to make for himself a reputation as a painter. From this intention he could be turned neither by the lucrative nature of his occupation as a draughtsman nor by the fact that his illustrations had earned for him a reputation great enough

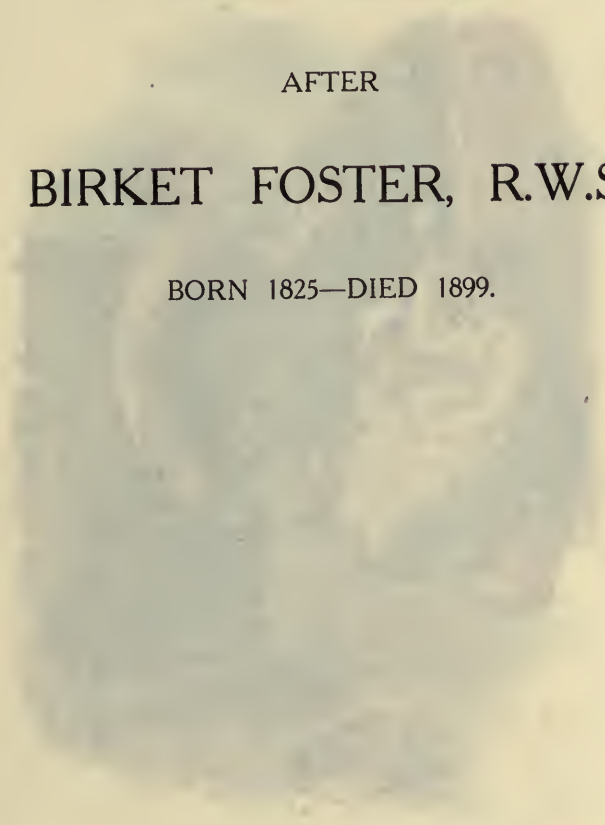
PLATE 16

“ BLOWING BUBBLES ”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1872—DIED 1899.



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BIRKET FOSTER

to excite the envy of any picture painter. He was dissatisfied with what he held to be ephemeral fame, and he aspired to produce something which would give him a more assured position among the creative artists of the British School. In the intervals of his labours for the publishers he continued to practise assiduously painting both in oils and in water colour, but as he destroyed the greater part of these exercises few are now available to show what degree of proficiency he attained as a painter during this earlier part of his career. Those that remain prove that he

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

possessed then, even more than in his later years, the love of microscopic exactness and the desire to record a multiplicity of small details which are characteristic qualities in his later practice.

Twelve years after he left Landells he finally decided to withdraw from the ranks of illustrative draughtsmen and to devote the rest of his life to painting only. But though he came to this decision in 1858, some few years elapsed before he could finally clear off the outstanding commissions which he had already accepted for book

BIRKET FOSTER

illustrations. Gradually, however, he freed himself from the ties which he was beginning to feel irksome, and as he diminished the calls upon his time he threw himself more and more into the pictorial work which made to him so strong an appeal. As a first step he spent the summer of 1858 at Dorking in careful and searching study of nature, and in the following spring he sent up some of the results of this summer's work to support his application for admission to the Society of Painters in Water Colours; and he also exhibited a water colour, "A Farm—

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

Arundel Park in the Distance," at the Royal Academy. He failed to secure election to the "Old Society" at his first attempt, but in 1860 he was made an associate, and only two years later a full member, so that at the age of thirty-five he had realized his ambition to be counted among the most distinguished of English water colourists.

This change in his position—and, in 1861, the death of his father—made him anxious to find a home away from London, as he felt that, having now no reason for remaining in the Metropolis, he would be better situated in

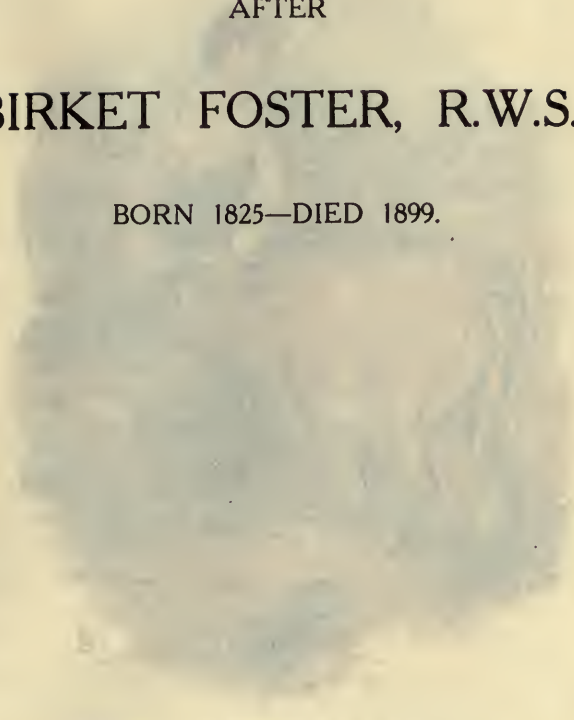
PLATE 17

"THE PET CALF"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1855—DIED 1899



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BIRKET FOSTER

some country district, where he could carry on his nature studies without interruption. So, on the invitation of Mr. J. C. Hook, he betook himself to Witley, in Surrey, in search of suitable quarters. For a while he occupied a small cottage there, but eventually he and Edmund Evans, the well-known engraver, who had married Foster's niece, bought and divided between them an estate of some twenty acres ; and the artist built himself upon his share of the land a house which was in every way suited to his needs.

The situation of this house was very happily chosen, and had a

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

particular fitness for its purpose as the dwelling-place of an artist who proposed to devote himself almost entirely to the representation of rural scenery, and who desired to live in surroundings which would satisfy fully his love of pure English landscape. The site he selected was on the top of a hill, from which stretched a most delightful view of rich wooded country, extending over Surrey and part of Sussex, and backed up by a great expanse of the South Downs. Subjects of the type he particularly enjoyed were all about him ; without straying many yards from his door he could find a

BIRKET FOSTER

wealth of material which not only fitted exactly his needs, but had an ample power of appeal to the patrons who in increasing numbers were demanding from him year by year evidences of his skill. Away from the noise and squalor of London, untroubled by the distractions of a great city, he was able in this ideal spot to give himself up fully to those rural influences which affected so definitely the manner of his artistic development, and helped to such a marked degree to give to his work its specific style.

The house itself—in which he lived till shortly before his death

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

in March, 1899—was built chiefly from his own design, and in its quaintness of arrangement and picturesqueness of detail it bore very plainly the stamp of his taste. For the decoration of the interior he applied to William Morris for a general scheme of ornamentation, which was provided, but never fully carried out. But by the assistance of a number of prominent artists the various rooms were quickly given decorative features of surpassing interest. Burne-Jones painted for the dining room a series of panels illustrating the legend of St. George and the Dragon, and designed many of the

PLATE 18

“BLACKBERRY GATHERERS”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



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BIRKET FOSTER

stained glass windows and fire-place tiles ; J. D. Watson executed two frescoes in the larger of the two studios ; Charles Keene made suggestions for the treatment of some of the quaintest and most effective of the windows ; and others of the artist friends whom Birket Foster had gathered round him brought their contributions to the scheme, which, if it lacked the completeness that would have been secured by strictly following the ideas of William Morris, gained by its very irregularity a special degree of significance, and was brought by its comprehensiveness more fully into touch with the

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

convictions of the man who had planned this house as his home.

Birket Foster's life in Surrey was quiet and uneventful, but he was certainly not isolated there, and absence from the Metropolis did not cause him to be separated from his friends. His house, indeed, became a kind of meeting place where many men famous in the art world foregathered—Sir John Gilbert, J. W. Whymper, Edmund Evans, Mr. Orchardson, Mr. Hook, and a host of others, among whom, perhaps most frequently of all, was included Fred Walker, who was on such intimate terms with the members

BIRKET FOSTER

of the Foster family that they looked upon him as almost one of themselves. Existence at "The Hill," as the house was called, was not hedged round with needless formalities and was not spoiled by the worship of conventions which would have jarred hopelessly with the artistic atmosphere of such a place. Birket Foster was too devoted to the profession which he followed with brilliant success to allow the pursuit of social trivialities to hamper him in his work. He laboured strenuously, and he was astonishingly prolific in his production ; and if in his art he had

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

—as all artists must have who chiefly occupy themselves with one class of subject—a strongly defined manner of expressing himself, he kept his mannerism pure and wholesome to the last, and never diverged from that course of practice which he had marked out so clearly in his earlier years.

PLATE 19

“BIRDS’-NESTING ON THE COMMON”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

Copyrighted Material

BOBBI 1832—DIED 1800

BIKKEL FOSTER, B.A.S.

WILEY

"BIRDS, NESTING ON THE COMMON"

PLATE 10



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BIRKET FOSTER

2 HIS WORK AS AN ILLUSTRATOR

“If the history of design in England be ever written, the book-illustrator will assume a more prominent place than is usually assigned to him,” wrote the late Cosmo Monkhouse. “A great deal of what is strongest, most living, and most national in English art lies between the covers of books. In the history of modern painting our portrait painters and our landscape painters more than hold their own against those of other nations, but the same can scarcely be said of our classical and his-

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

torical painters. It is not in our galleries, but in our books, that we must seek for this kind of strength." In accepting this pronouncement it is impossible to deny to Birket Foster a place of the highest importance among the men who have written their names large in the history of English art. His contributions to book-illustration were both enormous in quantity and consistently excellent in quality, and, great as was his share in establishing the continuity of our rustic art, his part in the natural development of illustration in this country was not less distinguished.

BIRKET FOSTER

During his long and busy career he had special chances of observing the way in which illustrative art was growing in favour both with artists and the public, and of noting developments in connection with it which were as valuable as they were remarkable. When he first began his experiences in the workshop of Landells, the famous "Annuals," illustrated with steel engravings, were waning in popularity because apparently people had become rather surfeited with books of this type. The steel engraving of that period, influenced as it was by Turner and the group of

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

admirable executants who translated his works into black and white under his immediate direction, had been carried to a pitch of perfection which it had never reached before, and which it has certainly not approached since ; and by the middle of the nineteenth century its decline was beginning. But by a fortunate chance there came just then the commencement of that great growth of illustrated weekly newspapers and other periodicals which has continued with unabated vigour for more than fifty years. At first, wood-engraving was the transcribing process

PLATE 20

“A SURREY LANE”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



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BIRKET FOSTER

almost universally adopted in the production of these periodicals ; and there arose in consequence a great school of engravers who interpreted with really surprising fidelity the drawings furnished by the artists. This school flourished exceedingly during that palmy period known as the "sixties," and though it was, not long after, killed by the invention of photographic process reproduction, it added much that is memorable to the sum total of the art achievement of this country.

Birket Foster had practically ceased to be an illustrator by the time that "process" had gained

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sufficient hold to come effectively into competition with wood engraving, so that the whole of his work in this direction was expressly intended to pass through the hands of the engraver, and was designed with careful consideration—based upon intimate personal experience—for the technicalities of wood-cutting. For this reason all his illustrations have a special character and a special charm—the charm of absolute fitness and perfect adaptation. They suggest that their distinctive qualities could not have been retained by any other method of reproduction, and that

BIRKET FOSTER

wood engraving alone would give them the daintiness of detail and the delicacy of effect which make them so peculiarly persuasive.

Perhaps the most prolific of all the years which he devoted to illustrative work was 1857, when he was approaching that important moment in his life at which he decided that his place was to be for the future among the painters rather than the draughtsmen. In this year were published nine books for which he provided the illustrations—"The Poets of the Nineteenth Century," "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Rhymes and Roundelays in

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Praise of a Country Life," "Ministering Children," "The Course of Time," Barry Cornwall's "Dramatic Scenes and New Poems," "The Lord of the Isles," Bloomfield's "The Farmer's Boy," and the book—of which the text was written by Henry Mayhew — on "The Upper Rhine : the Scenery of its Banks and the Manners of its People," which was a companion volume to "The Rhine," published in 1855. Both these books on the Rhine owed their existence to Birket Foster's shrewdness in making the most of all opportunities which came

PLATE 21

“THE GARDENER’S COTTAGE”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

BOKI 1852—DIED 1888.

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

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"THE GARDENER'S COLTAGE,"

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in his way. When he was sent by David Bogue, shortly after the publication of his "Evangeline" illustrations, on a trip to the Austrian Tyrol to make drawings for the adornment of an edition of "Hyperion," he availed himself of such an excellent chance of securing a series of sketches of the Rhine scenery ; these sketches were engraved on steel, and written round by Mayhew, and were utilised as material for a couple of attractive and popular publications.

To compile a list of the books for the illustration of which he was wholly or partly responsible

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

would be a considerable undertaking ; he did so much that an exhaustive record would be almost incredibly voluminous. But among the more memorable of his efforts must be counted the edition of Sir Walter Scott's poems issued by Messrs. A. and C. Black, of Edinburgh, in 1853-1855 ; " A Picturesque Guide to the Trossachs," " Poetry of the Year," and " A Holiday Book for Christmas and the New Year," in 1852 ; Martin Tupper's " Proverbial Philosophy," Gray's " Elegy written in a Country Churchyard," " L' Allegro," " Il Penseroso," and " The Blue Ribbon : a story of

BIRKET FOSTER

the Last Century," in 1854 ; "The Task," by Cowper, "The Traveller," by Goldsmith, and "The Poetical Works of George Herbert" in 1856 ; and in 1857 the remarkable series of volumes already mentioned. In 1858, 1859 and 1860 he was hardly less active, for in these three years he illustrated "The Poems of William Bryant," "The Poetical Works of Edgar Allen Poe," Milton's "Comus," Robert Falconer's "Shipwreck," Thomson's "Seasons," "Poems and Songs by Robert Burns," "Poems by William Wordsworth," "The Poetical Works of Thomas Gray,"

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“The Poems of Oliver Goldsmith,” Wordsworth’s “Deserted Cottage,” passing with equal zest and success to Byron’s “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” Shakespeare’s “Merchant of Venice” and “The Tempest,” Moore’s “Lallah Rookh,” and “Poems by James Montgomery,” with many other standard works by British authors. Although he decided in 1858 to take no further commissions for illustrations, those which he had in hand occupied him for some years longer, and it was not until 1863 that his activity in this branch of art really ceased. After that date his drawings ap-

PLATE 22

“RETURNING FROM MARKET”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

"RETURNING FROM MARKET"

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.



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BIRKET FOSTER

peared in books very rarely, and he could no longer be numbered among our illustrators, for the few examples of his work which were used in this way were reproductions of his water-colour paintings and not black and white designs prepared expressly for illustrative purposes.

No one who attempts to reckon up the work done by Birket Foster during the earlier years of his career can fail to be struck by the way in which publishers seemed to turn to him instinctively as the one pre-eminent illustrator of poetry, and especially of those poems which

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

deal with English rural life. The reason for this becomes sufficiently apparent when his art is analysed, for he was markedly inspired by the poetic sentiment of rusticity, and attained perhaps more perfectly than any other artist of our school the atmosphere suitable for such scenes as our poets have delighted to depict. He drew English landscape and the country people of England with shrewd discernment and yet with a refinement of artistry that gave to all his interpretations of nature an uncommon seductiveness. The beauty of his subjects roused him to the

BIRKET FOSTER

readiest response, but his eagerness to woo nature always in her smiling moods did not lead him into merely empty prettiness—there was usually a high degree of breadth and large simplicity in his designs, despite their complexity of detail.

He loved especially to introduce into his illustrations, as into his water colours, young people who, as Isaac Walton quaintly puts it, “have not yet attained so much age and wisdom as to load their minds with any fears of many things that will never be”; and if he idealised these rustic children into a perfection of good

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

behaviour, and represented them habitually as being of a "mild, sweet, and peaceable spirit," he, after all, did not try to do more than show them at their best. They had to have a certain, not impossible, daintiness so as to assort with those poetic aspects of the life of the fields which made upon him the strongest impression. And there was the same idealised realism in the older peasants who at times played parts in his drawings. His toilers stand erect; they are not bowed down and hopelessly struggling against fate; they carry out their appointed tasks

PLATE 23

“THE RIDE HOME”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER. R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

BOKI 1832--DIED 1889.

BIRKET FOSTER. B.W.S.

VOLUME

"THE KIDE HOME,"

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with a due measure of pleasure and interest, unlike the sombre, resigned and melancholy beings, uncouth, slow-moving, and coarsened by their painful existence, who have been painted so often by Millet, Segantini, and Josef Israels. The joy of life can be felt in his pictorial versions of the bright, robust, and wholesome English poetry, and he threw into all he did the glamour of summer with its smiling skies overhead and its depths of cool shade in the sylvan glades below. We may reasonably rejoice—all of us whose recollections of our childhood take us back to the

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

time when Birket Foster's illustrations filled the books we read—that we were brought up in such a cheery school. He did something to save us from the tendency to pessimism which afflicts the young people of to-day ; and we should be grateful to him always both for his kindly guidance and for the delight with which his smiling pictures are welcomed in our English homes.

BIRKET FOSTER

3 NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

The dainty freshness of sentiment which distinguished the whole mass of Birket Foster's work in black and white is even more plainly perceptible in his water colours. In search of material for his work he travelled much both in the British Isles and abroad, and there were few beauty spots in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, France, Italy, Switzerland, Spain and Germany which he had not visited. But the nature which he worshipped and particularly loved to paint was the nature of the

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green dales, the rippling streams, and the wooded hills of Surrey; and the people whose quiet and simple lives suggested the motives for so many of his compositions were the dwellers in this same delightful county. The genius of his art was derived in very great measure from the inspiration he received in his Surrey home, set as it was among surroundings which called into activity all his rare capacity for appreciating and interpreting the beauty of English rusticity. He would enter there intimately into the very heart of nature and could read her secrets with a confi-

PLATE 24

“A PEEP AT THE HOUNDS: ‘HERE THEY COME!’”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

green hills, the rippling stream,
 and the wooded hills all round,
 and the people whose quiet and
 simple lives suggested the motive
 for so many of his compositions
 were the chief sources of his
 delight. The sense of
 duty derived in very great
 measure from the impression he
 received from the English
 poets, and the English
 and interpreting the beauty of
 English society. He would
 enter their community
 very heartily, and could
 read his verses with

BORN 1851 DIED 1888

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

VOLUME

W. BIRKET FOSTER: HERE THEY COME!

PLATE 34



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BIRKET FOSTER

dence that was never misplaced.

In one small corner of the vast field of life in which it is the artist's privilege to range, he found enough to satisfy himself and the people whose approval he desired. Out of the simplest materials he could construct the whole delightful edifice of his art. The labourer's thatched cottage overgrown with honeysuckle, and standing in its little strip of garden with its trim hedge and its tiny flower beds bordered with box, was the scene of his pictorial dramas, and the actors were the peasant children, contented with their humble lot and untroubled by any of the care of

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

life, who gathered about the door or played upon the village green. All that he had expressed in his illustrations of the poems of our writers of pastorals he gave more fully, more convincingly, and with more charm and subtlety, in his paintings. That he made many successes with his studies of foreign subjects is by no means to be denied, but, on the whole, his best work as a painter was done in England, and it is the essentially English character of his art that makes so strong its hold upon the taste of the people who live in this country. He is one of the few artists of the Victorian era whose productions

BIRKET FOSTER

have more than maintained their market value, and are still eagerly sought after by collectors ; and assuredly there is a measure of hopefulness in the evidence which the sale-rooms afford of the still increasing appreciation of his records of nature.

It would seem to imply that there is existing amid all the haste and flurry of modern existence a genuine love of the old-time charm of rural life, and that the poetic aspect of quiet rusticity has even now a real power to persuade. The popular aspirations after the simple life may prove to be more than a mere craze of the

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

moment if they are based upon an actual understanding of the truths which Birket Foster strove so consistently to teach. And to decry such art as his—as men of what is called the advanced school are wont to do—is indisputably unwise. Because there was no particular audacity in his technical methods, because he dealt with little things and left alone the grimmer facts and the more startling problems of our social condition, it does not follow that his contribution to British art was unimportant or that there is nothing to be learned from the study of his pictures.

PLATE 25

“RETURNING FROM PASTURE—EVENING”

AFTER

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

BORN 1825—DIED 1899.

BORN 1851 - DIED 1888.

BIRKET FOSTER, R.W.S.

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RETAINING FROM PASTURE-EVENING

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BIRKET FOSTER

No one, of course, would desire to see imitators of his mannerisms, followers who would repeat his tricks of style without understanding the sentiment by which he was profoundly inspired; but an artist who would present rusticity with the same poetic daintiness, the same exquisite tenderness of feeling, and the same honest simplicity, would indeed be welcome now. We want badly someone to remind us what we should lose if we allowed our sensitiveness to the beauty of country life to become dulled; and until this new prophet of nature appears it will be well for us not to lose our

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faith in Birket Foster or to allow ourselves to be persuaded to despise what he did.

The illustrations which are given here may fairly be claimed as amply representative. Such subjects as the "Surrey Lane," "The Gardener's Cottage," "Summer Time," "The Pet of the Common," "The Ride Home," "Birds' Nesting," "Black-berry Gatherers," "The Rustic Stile," "The Boat Race," and "Bringing Home the Calf," are typical of what may be termed his anecdotal rusticity — nature notes into which the slenderest thread of story is introduced to

BIRKET FOSTER

make more interesting a frank study of landscape. Others like "A Peep at the Hounds," "The Cottage Nurse," "Making Hay while the Sun Shines," "Within the Wood," and the broader and more serious, "Returning from Pasture — Evening," show well what he could do with more complex material and with motives that required a greater degree of elaboration; and the "Coast Scene, Cullercoats," is instructive as an instance of his fairly frequent departures from the life of the fields and as an illustration of the adaptability of his methods of craftsmanship. The vignettes

IN RUSTIC ENGLAND

have a technical interest because they belong to a class of illustrative art in which he excelled ; one that was formerly extraordinarily popular and that was perhaps carried to its greatest perfection by Turner. Birket Foster's vignettes, whether in black and white or colour, were always exquisitely proportioned and most delicately managed ; and they certainly deserve a place of honour in any record of his achievement.

THE END.

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